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Narrating Debt and Migration: Yisrael Kssār from Ṣanʿāʾ to Bombay

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a Judaeo-Arabic letter probably sent in 1930 by Rabbi Yisrael Kssār from Bombay to his son in Ṣanʿāʾ. Prompted by a demand to repay a debt from 1905 to the Bawsī family, the letter weaves together a retrospective narrative and a plea for assistance. It reveals how moral obligation, communal reputation and emotional life intersected within the Jewish community of Ṣanʿāʾ and its diaspora. Drawing on a corpus of correspondence (1923–1937), family documents and oral histories, the study situates the letter within the upheavals in Yemen (1904–1905), which destabilised Kssār's economic base and led to his migration to Bombay. It explores his intellectual world, shaped by Yemenite kabbalistic traditions and the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora. Combining micro-historical and epistolary analysis, the article argues that the imperative to settle the debt illuminates the moral economy of obligation and the affective dimensions of migration during a period of dislocation.

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Introduction

In the early twentieth century, migration between Yemen and South Asia reshaped the social and economic ties of Yemenite Jewish communities.[1] This article centres on a letter sent by Rabbi Yisrael Kssār from Bombay (present-day Mumbai) to his eldest son Ḥayyim, who remained in Ṣanʿāʾ. The letter offers a unique window into the experiences and concerns of Yemenite Jewish families navigating the challenges of transnational migration and community maintenance during this pivotal period. Read closely, the letter illuminates the everyday infrastructure – credit, debt, communal brokerage, mobility – through which Yemenite Jewish communities sustained connections across Yemen, British India and the western frontier of South Asia.

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[1]Many studies have explored the immigration of Yemenite Jews to the Land of Israel; see, for example, Yehuda Nini, *The Jews of the Yemen, 1800–1914* (Routledge, 1991). In contrast, research on the migration of Yemenite Jews to other destinations remains relatively limited; notable contributions include Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, *Traditional Society in Transition: The Yemeni Jewish Experience* (Brill, 2014), and Menashe Anzi, "Cultural Exchange and Religious Guidance along the Shores of the Arabian Sea: Yemenite Jews in India and Indian Jews in Yemen", in *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Their Rise, Demise and Resurgence*, ed. Rotem Kowner (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 127–41.

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In Bombay, Yisrael's encounter with the newly arrived Qoraḥ family served as a painful reminder of his unsettled debt. Around 1929, Ḥabibah Qoraḥ, daughter of Ḥayyim Manṣūrah,[2] and her children travelled from Ṣanʿāʾ, Yemen to South Asia to reunite with the family patriarch, Sālim Qoraḥ, who had left for the subcontinent in the mid-1920s. Community records from Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) indicate that the family initially struggled financially,[3] until Sālim secured work as a community rabbi in Peshawar, enabling the family's reunification.[4]

When the family later arrived in Bombay, Ḥabibah's interactions with Rabbi Yisrael, an acquaintance from Ṣanʿāʾ and a long-term resident of the city, brought to the surface outstanding debts owed to the daughters of Hārun Bawsī.[5] This small episode offers a concrete entry point into the transregional economic ties that form the letter's wider horizon and the central concern of this article.

In the letter, likely written in 1930,[6] Yisrael recounts the renewed encounter in Bombay with members of the Qoraḥ family, during which a demand was made that he repay a debt dating back to 1905 in Ṣanʿāʾ.

As I will show, the letter moves between a detailed historical narrative, where Yisrael reconstructs the sequence of events from the early twentieth century that led to the creation of the debt owed to the Bawsī family, and the contemporary context of the early 1930s, spanning between Bombay and Ṣanʿāʾ. Within this framework, the father turns to his son, Ḥayyim, asking for his assistance in settling the longstanding debt.

Like the letter itself, this article will move across temporal and geographical boundaries, between early twentieth-century Ṣanʿāʾ, during the wars between Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd ad-Dīn and the Ottomans that brought famine and widespread death, and the 1930s, when Yisrael was living in Bombay while his family remained in Ṣanʿāʾ. At the same time, I move between text and context, focusing on the narrative itself while remaining attentive to how Yisrael articulated his fears, concerns and worldview. Read in this way, the letter not only recounts historical events but also reflects Yisrael's modes of perceiving and engaging with the world.

A Short Biography of Rabbi Yisrael Kssār

Rabbi Yisrael Kssār was born in the second half of the nineteenth century in Ṣanʿāʾ.[7] He immigrated from Ṣanʿāʾ to Bombay during the First World War or shortly after, like his

[2]For the sake of consistency in transliteration, I will retain the literary ending -ah, even though in the Jewish Ṣanʿāni dialect this ending is typically pronounced as -eh. For example, the female name was pronounced Ḥabibeh rather than Ḥabībah. About this phenomenon, see Ori Shachmon, *Tēmōnit: The Jewish Varieties of Yemeni Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2022), p. 76.

[3]A document from the Calcutta community records the economic difficulties faced by Sālim, as community leaders appealed for volunteers to support him during a period of hardship.

[4]See the memories of their son: Yosef Qorah, *ʾElu hem Ḥayyai* [These Are My Life] (Be'er Sheva: Yad Sarah, 2017), pp. 4–8 (in Hebrew), and interviews that were made with Yosef and his brother and sister. I am grateful to Gershon (Jerry) Qoraḥ for providing me with the materials.

[5]Ḥabībah Qoraḥ received the letter from the Bawsī daughters through her brother-in-law, Ḥayyim Sharʿabi, who was married to her sister and resided in Aden.

[6]The letter is undated; however, as demonstrated below, Yisrael revisited this matter in a letter dated 15 August 1930, suggesting that the event likely took place earlier that year, prior to August.

[7]The information is based on some conversations with the family members of Yisrael Kssār, and on the collection of letters kept by the family of Ḥaim and Naʿomi Kessar. I thank Shalom – and his son Yisrael – and Shlomo, the sons of Ḥaim Kessar, ʿAmalyah Binyamini, the daughter of Yehuda Kessar, Roni and Yisrael, the sons of Yaḥyā Kessar, and Brachah Kessar, the daughter-in-law of Yaḥyā Kessar.

friend Sālim Qoraḥ, leaving behind his wife and his young, unmarried children. Yemen of that period witnessed many political and military upheavals. As a result, Yisrael fell into difficult financial debts, was forced to leave the city, and finally established himself in Bombay. For the same financial reasons, he did not return to Ṣanʿāʾ in the years that followed, as we will see later. His wife Naʿamah stayed in Yemen and raised the children: Ḥayyim, Yaḥyā, Yehuda, Ḥamāmah and Sālim.[8] In the following years, the children married, raised families, and contended with economic hardship and housing instability. Among them, the eldest son, Ḥayyim, emerged as the most prominent and financially stable. He served as a key figure within the family, supporting his mother in Ṣanʿāʾ and acting as a pillar of assistance to his father, who remained in India.

It is likely that most of the family members reunited in Palestine around 1935. The father, Yisrael, arrived that year from India and joined his children, who had arrived a few years before. The eldest son, Ḥayyim, remained in Ṣanʿāʾ, but later he also joined the family in Jerusalem in 1937.

Yisrael's migration to India should be understood within a broader historical context of intensified mobility and exchange across the Indian Ocean world. Ties between Yemen and the Indian subcontinent strengthened from the early modern period, but assumed new significance from the nineteenth century onwards. Expanding maritime traffic and the consolidation of British imperial power reshaped commercial networks and facilitated increased movement, drawing Jewish communities along the region's shores into closer and more sustained contact.

From the nineteenth century, Jewish life in Yemen was marked by growing political and economic instability, including renewed Ottoman rule and British control of Aden. These developments, together with recurring economic crises and environmental hardship, encouraged migration. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Yemenite Jews continued to move to India, and the majority became integrated into the commercial and social networks of the Baghdadi Jewish firms in which they were employed. Alongside this broader pattern of integration, a small number of Yemenite Jews who arrived in Bombay in the early twentieth century continued to preserve elements of communal practice and social ties rooted in their place of origin.[9]

It was within this milieu that Yisrael Kssār settled. Tracing his correspondence allows for a more nuanced understanding of the emotions and everyday sensibilities of Yemenite migrants, dozens of whom relocated to South Asia during the same period.

In Bombay, Yisrael worked as a religious teacher and rabbi at the Sassoon family's synagogue.[10] He faced immense challenges: severe financial hardship, separation from his family and medical issues. His challenging circumstances prompted detailed, weekly letters to his family. Despite the difficulties, he sent his earnings back to Yemen, gradually supporting his children and repaying part of his debts. For instance, Yehuda Kssār admitted before Rabbi Yaḥyā Yiṣḥak Halevi that he had received five

[8]As noted (see n. 2), names and terms are transcribed according to standard Arabic conventions. In the Judaeo-Arabic dialect of Ṣanʿāʾ, the name Naʿamah is pronounced Neʿemeh, Yaḥyā was typically pronounced Yiḥye, and Ḥamāmah was typically pronounced Ḥamāmeh.

[9]See Anzi, "Cultural Exchange and Religious Guidance".

[10]On the Sassoon family, Joseph Sassoon, *The Sassoons: The Great Global Merchants and the Making of an Empire* (New York: Pantheon, 2022).

rials from his brother Ḥayyim, funds that had been transferred to him *min ṭaraf wālido Yisrael min Bombai* ("from the side of his father Yisrael from Bombay").[11]

The close and sustained correspondence between father and son was thus not only a response to hardship and separation, but also a practical necessity generated by their involvement in the circulation of manuscripts and sacred objects – materials that were not always available in India and whose Yemeni provenance carried particular prestige. This commercial collaboration required regular coordination and updates, reinforcing the frequency and intensity of their epistolary exchange.

In practice, this collaboration took the form of Yisrael's involvement in the sale of sacred objects and manuscripts in Bombay, in partnership with his son Ḥayyim, with whom he conducted the business of selling books, manuscripts and ritual objects. These objects included scrolls, *tefillin*, *tzitzit* and *tallitot* – items integral to Jewish prayer and practice. For example, in a letter dated 10 Aadar I, 5684 (15 February 1924), Yisrael mentioned that he asked his cousin Sleiman to send a book and two scrolls from Aden and also specifies their price. In another letter, from August 1924, he notes that he had sent the proceeds from the sale of mezuzahs and scrolls to Mori Yiṣḥak Cohen in Aden, with the intention that they be passed on to his son Ḥayyim. However, the sales were not always successful. In a letter dated 22 May 1924, for instance, Yisrael wrote that he was unable to sell the book, apparently a manuscript, because seven other books, presumably printed editions, had just arrived from Jerusalem.[12] In another instance, Yisrael noted the growing competition in the sale of *tefillin*[13] from merchants importing such items from Baghdad. Consequently, he urged his son to ensure that only superior quality *tefillin* were sent.[14]

Occasionally, Yisrael also engaged in the purchase of books, which were printed elsewhere but acquired in India, with the intention of selling them in Yemen. For instance, in a letter dated Friday, 22 Tammuz (corresponding likely to 22 July 1927), he informed his son Ḥayyim of his plan to obtain books from the synagogue in Bombay. The list included Talmudic tractates, Midrash Rabbah, the Arbaʿah Turim, Ḥoq le-Yisrael, the *Zohar*, ʿEn Yaʿaqov and the Book of Psalms. However, he sought clarification on how these volumes could be transported to Aden.[15]

The son, Ḥayyim, was involved in the trade of ancient manuscripts, including within Yemen itself.[16] In one documented case, an agreement was signed before Rabbi ʿAmram Qoraḥ in Ṣanʿāʾ, according to which Ḥayyim Kssār purchased three volumes of the *Zohar* on behalf of Mūsī ʿAmr. The books were acquired from members of the al-Ṣaubāri family in the city of Radāʿ. However, the sale was later contested by Ṣāliḥ al-Dhahārī, a dealer in antique books, who appealed the transaction before the Muslim court in Radāʿ and subsequently before the Muslim court in Ṣanʿāʾ, presided over by Judge Luṭf al-Zubayrī.[17]

[11]This statement was documented in a legal bill written by Rabbi Yaḥyā Yitzhak Halevi, dated 14 Tishrei 5626, corresponding to 20 October 1925. The document is preserved in the Kessar collection and was authored in Judaeo-Arabic.
[12]The letters are preserved in the Kessar collection. For a detailed discussion of the collection, see below.
[13]Yisrael referred to *tefillin* in the plural form *tefillinot*, a usage customary within the Jewish communities of Yemen.
[14]This remark appears in a letter from the Kessar Collection, dated 14 Menaḥem [Av] (corresponding likely to 8 August 1930).
[15]The letter is preserved in the Kessar collection.
[16]This important topic has not yet been addressed in current research and will be explored elsewhere.
[17]On Ṣāliḥ al-Ẓāhirī, see Mordekhai Yitzhari, *Ḥayim Soʿarim: Perakim ʿAlilatiyim be-Ḥayav shel ha-Rav Ṣadoq Yiṣhari (Ṣāliḥ al-Ẓāhirī)* [Stormy Lives: Narrative Chapters in the Life of Rabbi Ṣadoq Yiṣhari (Ṣāliḥ al-Ẓāhirī)] (Netania: Ha-Agudah le-Tipuʿaḥ Ḥevrah ve-Tarbut be-Israel [1996]) (in Hebrew). The Judge Luṭf b. Muḥammad al-Zubayrī (1875–1944) was

The agreement states that although Mūsī ʿAmr had already paid for the books, he undertook to cover all forthcoming legal expenses arising from the dispute, including the fees of the Muslim lawyer al-Ḥajj Aḥmad al-Ṣayāġī.[18]

The trade in Yemeni manuscripts in India, alongside the circulation of printed books from India to Yemen, demonstrates that Yemen continued to serve as a centre for manuscript production well into the twentieth century, whereas India and other regions had already shifted primarily to the sale of printed works.

Beyond his work in the trade of antique books and religious artefacts, Ḥayyim was also involved in the lucrative alcohol business. His prosperity, as reflected in substantial tax records, established him as one of the city's leading merchants.[19] This financial standing is crucial for understanding the central theme of this study: the request from his father, Yisrael, to assist in settling the family's significant debt to the Bawsī family.

Ḥayyim was involved in the sale of ancient books and manuscripts, as well as in other goods between Ṣanʿāʾ, Taʿizz and Aden. His frequent travels to Aden played a key role in maintaining communication with his father in India. Since both Aden and Bombay were under British rule at the time, people maintained regular correspondence between the two locations.

A portion of the preserved letters appear to have been addressed to the city of Aden – either to Rabbi Yiṣḥaq Kohen, the Chief Rabbi of Aden, or to the merchant Yaʿaqov ʾElʿazar, with whom the sender maintained close ties. From there, the letters were forwarded to Ḥayyim, either directly or via mutual acquaintances. In some cases, the letters awaited Ḥayyim's arrival in Aden or Taʿizz; in others, they were sent onwards with merchants travelling from Aden to Ṣanʿāʾ, such as Nissim Ḥibshūsh or Shemuel Ḥamdī.[20]

Over the course of approximately fifteen years, extensive correspondence was maintained between Yisrael and his family, particularly with Ḥayyim, which offers a remarkably continuous and detailed portrait of this period. The corpus comprises approximately 185 surviving letters, the earliest of which dates to 1923 and the latest to 1937, shortly before Ḥayyim and his family immigrated to Jerusalem.[21] The precise scope of the original correspondence cannot be determined, and it is likely that additional letters have been lost.[22] The letters are written in Judaeo-Arabic, although there are occasional deviations from the established norms, and the text reflects the phonetic conventions of the time.[23] It should also be noted that as time passed and Yisrael grew older, his eyesight deteriorated, and his handwriting became increasingly careless and difficult to read.

the first judge of Ṣanʿāʾ and a member of the court of appeals. See Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Zabārah, *Nuzhat al-naẓar fī riǧāl al-qarn al-rābiʿ ʿašar* [A Stroll of Reflection on the Men of the Fourteenth Century], ed. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Yaḥyā Zubārah and ʿAbd Allāh al-Jirāfī (Ṣanʿāʾ: Maktabat al-Irshād, 2010), pp. 527–9 (in Arabic).

[18]The document was signed before rabbi ʿAmram Qoraḥ on the 2nd of Cheshvan, the year 2242 of the Seleucid Era, which is the end of the year 1930 CE. The lawyer was most likely Aḥmad al-Ṣayāġī, who was born in 1906–1907 in Ṣaʿda. He held senior positions in the Imāmate's judicial system in the Ibb region and was killed by the Egyptian army during the Yemeni Civil War in 1964. See Zubārah, *Nuzhat al-Naẓar*, pp. 60–1.

[19]On his position, see my forthcoming article, "Letters and the Jewish Yemenite Diaspora".

[20]On the Ḥibshūsh family and its role as merchants and intermediaries between the Yemeni Jewish diaspora and the Jews of Yemen, see Menashe Anzi, "Yemenite Jews in the Red Sea: Trade, Migration and Diaspora", *Zmanim* 150 (2024): 22–31 (in Hebrew). I am currently completing a comprehensive study of the family, which I hope will be published in the coming years.

[21]The letters were initially preserved by Ḥayyim Kssār, the primary recipient of the correspondence, and are currently held within a private family collection maintained by his family in Israel. All translations are my own.

[22]The collection also contains approximately 110 documents and letters involving other individuals, which are not discussed here.

[23]This is not the place to elaborate on grammatical or lexical issues; I hope to address these matters elsewhere.

Regrettably, the overwhelming majority of the preserved letters are from Yisrael to Ḥayyim, with only a few addressed to other family members. Apart from a single letter from Ḥayyim to his father, we have no correspondence from the other side, that is, letters sent from Yemen to India. Consequently, we hear the children's responses to their father's words only indirectly, through his replies to their remarks.[24]

The uneven and one-sided nature of this correspondence thus raises a broader methodological question regarding the use of personal letters as sources for historical inquiry. Historians began to make extensive use of letters as a source for understanding migrant experiences over a century ago. A foundational work in this regard is Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which placed letters at the centre of sociological and historical analysis of migration. A prominent contemporary study on which I draw here is David Gerber's *Authors of Their Lives*, which explores the personal correspondence of British immigrants to North America in the nineteenth century and demonstrates how letters function not only as historical evidence but also as texts that construct identity, family ties and social relationships.[25]

The collection of letters analysed herein offers substantial support for the theses articulated by Gerber. The letters of Kssār's family go beyond documenting the "dry history" of political events and hardships. They serve as intimate reflections of familial relationships, emotional and psychological states, and the broader cultural atmosphere of the time. As Gerber wrote, "A personal letter is an intimate, if long-distance, conversation with another".[26] As such, they provide a rare and nuanced glimpse into the lived experience of a family navigating transnational separation and changing historical circumstances.

This wealth of documentation – hundreds of letters, other family documents, and interviews with Yisrael's grandchildren – allows the letter concerning the debt to the Bawsī family to be read within the broader context of the period. This deep insight into the man and his family offers a rich and layered interpretation of the letter and the narrative folded within it.

Armed with this contextual information, we can now turn to the letter itself. As noted, this document recounts a meeting between Yisrael and the Qoraḥ family in Bombay during the early 1930s, and probably in the year 1930 itself; but more importantly, it offers a detailed explanation of the early twentieth-century events that culminated in the creation of the great debt.

The Letter

The text is reproduced here in its original form, except for the addition of punctuation. It accurately reflects the Ṣanʿānī dialect of the Jewish community of the city.[27] The author did not consistently apply diacritical vocalisation and at times diverged from standard

[24]The fact that usually only one side of a correspondence is preserved has been discussed in the scholarly literature; see David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

[25]See Florian Znaniecki and William I. Thomas, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1918–1920); and Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*.

[26]Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, p. 2.

[27]On the Arabic language of Yemenite Jews, see Shachmon, *Tēmōnit*. On the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ, see ibid., pp. 75–84.

orthography; this approach has been retained in the transcription. Linguistic aspects of the text are not addressed, except for a few brief annotations.[28]

As will be seen below, the first part of the letter offers a historical account of events that occurred approximately twenty-five years prior to its composition. The writer, Yisrael, made a clear effort to recount these events faithfully, quoting individuals in their own words and transitioning between direct quotations and narrative description. Although it is not certain that these quotations are entirely verbatim, Yisrael deliberately chose to present them as direct speech. However, these transitions are often unclear, which further complicates the interpretation of the text. I have attempted to clarify such passages in the translation by using quotation marks and other typographic cues. In some cases, the text remains fragmented, and I have relied on footnotes to explain obscure sections or used square brackets to identify speakers or clarify terms. In a few instances, my interpretations are conjectural.[29]

Part I – Original

[עמוד א שורה 1] חאוי כיר ועאפייה. הקב"ה יצילך מכל צרה וצוקה. ויצילך מכל אויב וצר. ויצילך מכל דינים קשים [2] ויצליח דרכיך וישיר כל ארחתיך ויתן לך חן וחסד בעיני כל אדם. אסמע מא אבשרך: [3] מרת סאלם קרח וצלת, ותנצת לי אגי אלי ענדהא. ורחת, קאלת לי: וצלך כט מן חיים שרעבי ולכט מן [4] בנאת הרון אלבוסי, יקליין ענדי לאבוהן מייאת אכורג דמתי, אשוף מא אדי להן. ואחכיך כיף אלכבר: [5] בעד חוזת אלנפר כאן מעא הרון אלבוסי ת'ק'נ' וקייה כלאצה. קאל לעמך: יסיר ינפעה יביעהא פי [6] אלחדידה. ווצלו אלי מנאכה ואן אלדרכים מקולקלות. וכאן גמיע אלתגאר יצאלו בית ואחד תאגר,[7] קד נסית אסמו, ועמך בינהם. שאפו אלטריק כוף, קאל צאחב אלבית האדא אלתאגר: יגיכן גמיע [8] מא מעאהם והו ירסלהן. קבצ'והֶ[30] גמיע אלתגאר אלדי מעאהם. והאדא צאחב אלבית אלתאגר [9] ענדה לצאחב אלחדידה פלוס. תפס גמיע אלדי ארסל. וצאחב אלבית מַכַן גמיע אלתגאר [10] רכב אלחיוד. אחבסוני מא ענדי כאופן, רגע תכורגו מנה לשליש ולרביע. ואמא עמך [11] ולא רצ'י ידי לה שי. ולבוסי יחרבני אריד חקי. כלפני ארוח מנאכה. אסתחא מני צאחב [12] אלבית. באע מני אלבית בדאלך אלכלאצה. וסלמת מן ענדי כרג אלבצירה. ורגענא צנעא. וצלנא [13] צנעא, גא אלבוסי אלי ענד עמך, קאל לה: מא ענדי לך שי. ואלבוסי ירא שמיים. רגע גא אלי ענדי. [14] קלת לה: אליהודי אכד מאל אלעולם, מא עליך וחדך. אלאן חצלנא אלבית. קאל ביע אלבית. [15] רגעת רַחֶת אלי מנאכה, דלינא אלבית. אדו פייה תלאת מייה. אכריתה. ורגעת צנעא. ולבוסי [16] ידעי. וצרפה וחמאר ותעב עלייא לא פי בטני ולא פי צ'הרי. בעדא יא תאג ראסי כאן יחיא פנחס [17] ידי אלי ענדי פלוס. אסתכרי לה גמאל. וחצלת אלחוזה ולפלוס ענד אלגמאלה, מחמד עיאש ולהנדי, [18] ולגמאלה רובם מַאתָו. ופנחס יכאטבני, ואנא אקלה: מאתו אלגמאלה. רגע אשתרא מני אלבית [19] בת'ק' ריאל ואנא קלת לבוסי בעתה בש'. והו ערף אן בכם אשתראה פנחס. ופנחס קטע [עמוד ב שורה 1] אלדי ענד אלגמאלה ר"ס ריאל. ואנא סלמת ללבוסי ש"מ וורק לי מא בקי לה חק ולא דעוא. ואמא [2] אלדעא ידעי וישכי עלא אלאואדם אן אחנא אפקרנאה. ולורקה כליתהא פי טאקת אלמכאן ומא זאד [3] חצלתהא. והאדא תגאה מא אסאפר סת סבע סנין. אלאן קאלו אלחכמים אלולד יציל אבוה מן דיני [4] גיהינם. אריד תסתנב פי האדא בעקל בשטראה. לאני כאיף יגיבוני פלגלגול נתקאצ'א. שוף כיף תרוח [5] אלי ענד בנאת אלבוסי. וקל להן אבי ערפני אן מרת סאלם קרח קאלת אן

[28] In every instance where the letter *zayin* (ז) appeared instead of *he* (ה), I have replaced it with *he* for readability.

[29] For the translation, I relied on standard dictionaries, especially Moshe Piamenta, *Dictionary of post-Classical Yemeni Arabic*, 2 vols (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1991). I also benefited from the expertise of several friends and colleagues. My thanks go to my research assistant, Michael Garashi-Gershoni, to Adaya Anzi, to Menaḥem Ṣuberi, and to my colleagues Oded Zinger, Dotan Arad, Tom Fogel and Guy Ron-Gilboa.

[30] The Hebrew vocalisation (*niqqud*) throughout the letter is preserved as in the original.

אַנתַיין בדקליין[31] אן [6] ענד אבי מייאת האדא גזאה חן[32] סאר וגא אלי מנאכה. ואלי מא כאן שא יחצל אבוכן שי. ולאכן [7] בינך וביננהן לא ינפתח עלייא דעוא ואנת עארף שריעת האדא אלאייאם. ולאכן שוף יא תאג ראסי [8] אן כאן תקל להן אנא אדי לכן עשרין מן ענדי. והאדא אלשֵם אַרָע[33] אלדי בדחכיין עלא [9] אבי מא לכן חאגה ויא תאג ראסי אלאדם יתבייש בעה"ז אחסן מא יתבייש בין אלפים וריבות מלאכים [10] ולא תצ'חך עלייא ותקול אבוך שוטה כופת אלה ב"ה פי קלבי. ואנא אחכיך במא פי קלבי אנא מכאלץ. [11] וקע להן ק' ריאל כל עיד כ' עלא שרט ירוחיין עלא קבר אבוהן ויקוליין אמחול לאברהם אלכסאר ולאכוה [12] קד תראצ'ינא. לאכן לו ינפתח האדא אלחכי ענדהן שא יתצטק[34] כלאמהן אלדי ביקליין ענדי מיאת [13] ואנא ית' מטלע לא פי בטני ולא פי צ'הרי חתא אלפלוס אלדי כאנת ענד אלגמאלה מא חצלת [14] מנהא שי. ולאכן אנא כאיף מן דיני שמיים. יום אשתרא פנחס אלבית בת"ק ואנא מא [15] סלמת ללבוסי אלא ש"מ ולאכן מא אשראה פנחס בלת"ק אלי יערף אן אלפלוס אלדי [16] ענד אלגמאלה מייתה ולאכן קד ערפתך בלואקע ולא אחד ידרי ושוף כיף תציל [17] אבוך מן דיני שמים. וערפני אייש יקטע עקלך וית' יצילך מכל צרה [18] ושלום והאדא אלכט הזהר והשמר לא חד ישופה ובעד מא תפתהמה שטטה וב'.

[On the verso of the document:] - ולא אחד ישוף דאלך אלכט אלי אנת

Part II – Translation[35]

[P. A, L. 1] May you have goodness and health. May the Holy One, blessed be He, deliver you from every trouble and distress, and save you from every enemy and adversary. May He rescue you from every harsh judgment, [2] grant you success in your ways, make all your paths straight, and grant you grace and favour in the eyes of all people.[36]

Listen to the news I bring you: [3] the wife of Sālim Qoraḥ arrived and wrote to me to come to her. When I went, she told me that you had received a letter from Ḥayyim Sharʿabi and a letter from [4] the daughters of Hārun al-Bawsī, saying that I owe their father hundreds (of riyals), and that I should see what I can give them.

And I will tell you the events: [5] after *Ḥawzat al-Nafar*, there remained in the possession of Hārun al-Bawsī 550 wuqiyya[37] of silver.[38] He told your paternal uncle that it

[31] The shift from *tāʾ* to *dāl* is characteristic of the pronunciation of Jews from central Yemen; see Yosef Tobi, *Qehilat Yehude Radaʿ she-betiman ba-meʾah ha-shemoneh-ʿesreh* (The Jewish Community of Radāʿ in Yemen in the Eighteenth Century) (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1992), p. 22 (in Hebrew).

[32] The term in Judaeo-Arabic is ambiguous; based on the context, it is transcribed as הן rather than הן.

[33] The phrase "אלשם א-רע" reflects the adaptation of the Hebrew expression "השם הרע" ("bad name") into Judaeo-Arabic. The definite article is applied according to Arabic grammar: "אל" before "שם," and assimilation of the /l/ before the sun letter /r/, yielding "א-רע." This illustrates the influence of Arabic phonology and morphology on Hebrew-origin terms in Judaeo-Arabic.

[34] As in other cases, the letter ṣād was replaced here by ṭāʾ. See Piamenta, Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic, Part II, p. 279. The shift from dāl to ṭāʾ, likely influenced by the emphatic nature of the adjacent consonant, is characteristic of the pronunciation of Jews from central Yemen. See Yosef Tobi, Qehilat Yehude Radaʿ, p. 150.

[35] I have endeavoured to render the translation as faithfully as possible to the source. However, in several places the text is fragmentary or obscure; in such cases, I have attempted to supply reasonable restorations and produce a coherent reading.

[36] The passage from "May the Holy One, blessed be He" up to the words "every person" was written in Hebrew in the original document; the text that follows appears in Judaeo-Arabic. In the transcription, Hebrew words have been italicised to indicate that they are Hebrew and not Judaeo-Arabic; this formatting does not appear in the original manuscript.

[37] A weight unit, approximately 30–40 grams each.

[38] According to Rabbi Yosef Qāfiḥ, *mukhlaṣ* (probably *mukhllaṣ*) refers to silver composed of 85% pure silver and 15% copper. The term *kallāṣ* denotes a silversmith; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that *kaullāṣah* refers to an alloy of pure silver and copper. See Yosef Qāfiḥ, *Halikhot Teiman* [Customs of Yemen], 5th ed. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2002), pp. 304–5 (in Hebrew). see also Shimʿon Greidi, "Jewelry of Yemenite Jews", in *Maʿaseh Rokem: ha-Levush ve-ha-Tachshit be-Masoret Yehudei Teiman* [Embroiderer's Work: Dress and Jewelry in the Tradition of the Jews of Yemen], ed. Carmella Abdar (Israel: ʿAle Be-Tamar, 2008), p. 48 (in Hebrew).

would benefit him to sell it [6] in al-Ḥodaydah. They arrived in Manākhah, but the roads were in poor condition. All the merchants gathered in one house of one merchant, [7] whose name I forgot, and your uncle was among them. They saw the road was dangerous. The owner of the house, this merchant, said: "Bring me everything [8] you have", and He would send it on. All the merchants gave him what was with them. This merchant, the owner of the house, [9] owed a merchant from al-Ḥodaydah. He seized all those he sent.[39] The owner of the house allowed all the merchants [10] to travel to the highland regions.[40] [He said:] "Arrest me, I have no fear". After that, some of the merchants took a third and a quarter from him [meaning they managed to get some of the money from him]. As for your uncle, [11] he [i.e., the owner of the house in Manākhah] refused to give him anything.

And al-Bawsī attacked me, saying: "I want what's mine". He forced me to leave [Ṣanʿāʾ and go to] Manākhah, and the owner of the house felt ashamed before me. [12] He sold me the house instead of this silver. I paid from my side the consideration for the document, and we returned [13] to Ṣanʿāʾ. When we arrived in Ṣanʿāʾ, al-Bawsī came to your uncle and [your uncle] told him: "I do not owe you anything". And al-Bawsī, being God-fearing, came to me [14] and I told him: "The Jew has taken the property of the world; the responsibility does not rest on you alone.[41] Now we have obtained the house". He said: "Sell the house". [15] I returned and went to Manākhah; We showed the house. They paid three hundred. I rented it out. Then I returned to Ṣanʿāʾ. And al-Bawsī [16] gives the orders, while I bear the expenses, work like a donkey, and endure exhaustion – yet I gain nothing from it, neither in my belly nor in my back (i.e. neither directly nor indirectly).[42] After that, O crown of my head[43] Yaḥyā Pinḥas [17] gave me money to hire camels for him. Then the *ḥawza* occurred, and the money was with the camel drivers: Muhammad ʿAyyāsh and al-Hindi (i.e., Indian man), [18] and most of the camel drivers have since died.[44] Pinḥas wrote to me, and I told him: "most of the camel drivers had died". Then he bought the house from me [19] for five hundred riyals, and I told al-Bawsī that I sold it for 300. He (i.e Bawsī) knew how much Pinḥās bought it for. And Pinḥas asserted [P. 2, L. 1] that the amount for the camel drivers was 260 riyals. And I paid al-Bawsī 340 riyals, and He [i.e Bawsī] wrote to me that no right or claim remained. Yet, [2] among the people,[45] there arises a claim and complaint that we have impoverished him. I left the document in the window of the large room (called al-Makān), and I gained nothing [3] more from it.[46] This occurred six or seven years prior to my departure.[47]

[39]Meaning that the merchant from Manākhah owed money to the merchant in al-Ḥodaydah; so, when the caravan shipment reached al-Ḥodaydah, that merchant, the creditor, attached the goods in satisfaction of the outstanding debt.
[40]The original sentence is unclear, and its translation remains uncertain.
[41]This phrase likely reflects an ironic communal sentiment, suggesting a perception of shared responsibility for material possessions rather than attributing it to a single individual.
[42]The original sentence is unclear, and its translation remains uncertain.
[43]"Tāj rāsī", literally, "the crown of my head". An Arabic expression used to convey deep respect and appreciation for someone close or highly esteemed.
[44]Ḥawza, explained as "ḥawzat al-nafar", refers in this context to the siege of Ṣanʿāʾ during that period, and this is the reason why most of them died.
[45]Another possibility is that al-Bawsī himself claims and complains to others that we have made him poor.
[46]Probably meaning: I no longer had access to it.
[47]The phrase "prior to my departure" may also imply a causal nuance, which explains why he could no longer find the document he had left on the window.

Now the sages said: "The son saves his father from the judgment [4] of Gehenna".[48] I want you to be in charge of this matter and handle it with wisdom and prudence, because I fear they might bring me to trial concerning *Gilgul* [reincarnation]. See how you should go [5] to the daughters of al-Bawsī and tell them: "My father told me that the wife of Sālim Qoraḥ said that you said that [6] my father has a debt of hundreds to you, that had been paid during the time he went and came to Manākhah. And other than that, your father was not meant to get anything". But [7] between you and them, [it's better to resolve this],[49] so that no lawsuit is filed against me, as you know the way the law works these days. But see, O crown of my head, [8] if you can tell them: "I will give you twenty (Rial) from my own. And the bad name (i.e., the slander) that you spoke about [9] my father, you don't need it". And O crown of my head, a person should be ashamed in this world rather than be ashamed among thousands and tens of thousands of angels. [10] And do not laugh at me, nor say that your father is a fool; a fear of God, blessed be He, is in my heart, and I am telling you what is in my heart – I am sincere. [11] You should agree with them on [a debt of] 100 riyals, [to be paid in instalments of] 20 riyals on each holiday, on the condition that they visit their father's grave and say: "Forgive Abraham Al- Kssār and his brother, [12] as agreed". Therefore, if this discussion opens, their statement will be justified, for what they say – I owe them hundreds. [13] For God [knows] I have nothing, neither in my belly nor on my back, and even from the money that was with the camel driver, I received [14] nothing. But I fear the judgment of Heaven. The day Pinḥas bought the house for 500, and I [15] gave al-Bawsī only 340, but Pinḥas bought it for five hundred, and he knows that the money [16] with the camel drivers was gone. But I have told you the truth, and no one knows. See how you can save [17] your father from the judgment of Heaven. Let me know what you decide, and may He save you from every trouble. [18] Peace.

And this letter, beware that no one sees it. After you understand it, tear it up.[50]

[On the verso of the document:] No one will see this letter but you.

Analysis of the Letter: Form and Context

The letter is composed of two distinct and clearly delineated sections. In the first, Yisrael set out the circumstances that led to the accumulation of the debt, offering a detailed and relatively austere narrative of the historical events of 1905–1906.

This narrative section is composed of a continuous reconstruction of quotations drawn from conversations that took place in the early years of the twentieth

[48]This expression appears in numerous sources, the earliest of which date to the Geonic period. A central source supporting this claim is found in Kallah Rabbati, Chapter 2, Halakha 9; see the text cited in Yakhin Epstein, *ʿIyunim be-Masekhet Kallah Rabbati – Nosaḥ, ʿArikha ve-Tequfa* (Studies in Massekhet Kalla Rabbati – Text, Redaction and Period) PhD Thesis, Hebrew University, 2009, p. 390 (in Hebrew). However, it appears that Rabbi Yisrael was familiar with this argument through the formulation found in *Menorat ha-Maor* (Ner 1, Kelal 1, Vol. 2, Chapter 1 (or according to the running numbering, *Menorat ha-Maor*, Chapter 9, as it appears in editions that were common in Yemen), which was extremely widespread among Yemenite Jews.

[49]The Arabic expression denotes amicable resolution, often implying action beyond strict legal or normative requirements.

[50]This letter includes a directive for its destruction after reading, reflecting the highly sensitive or confidential nature of its content. For another example of such a directive, see Miriam Frenkel, *Ha-Ohavim ve-ha-Nedivim: 'Elite Manhiga be-Kerev Yehudei Alexandria bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* ("The Compassionate and Benevolent": The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria in the Middle Ages), Jerusalem 2006, doc. 76, pp. 552–6 (in Hebrew). I am grateful to Oded Zinger for drawing my attention to this reference.

century. It features fluid transitions between direct citations and descriptive commentary, weaving together voices from the past with interpretive narration. The rhetorical strategy of integrating direct quotations enhances the authority and credibility of the author's voice. Nevertheless, it often obscures the intended meaning and complicates the task of producing a coherent translation. These frequent transitions between quoted speech and narrative commentary disrupt the textual flow, particularly in the initial section, where I was compelled to provide more extensive clarifications, either in parentheses or in footnotes, to preserve clarity and interpretive continuity.

In the second part, the father turns to his son in an emotional appeal, imploring him to help repay the debt. This latter section is situated in the present and adopts a personal and affective tone. While this tone serves a persuasive function, it also reflects, genuinely and unambiguously, the father's emotional turmoil.

For the purposes of analysis, I will examine the two sections separately. The first part will be contextualised within the broader historical framework of the early twentieth century, during which a devastating war and a severe famine afflicted central Yemen. I will also consider the literary strategies employed by the father on account of these events. The second part will be approached from a cultural and emotional perspective, focusing on the traditional and moral vocabulary through which the father frames his appeal. Here, he not only seeks to convince his son, but also lays bare the depth of his distress and the values through which he interprets his predicament.

Part I – Ṣanʿāʾ in Crisis: The 1905 Siege and its Context

The period around 1905 in central Yemen was defined by a complex interplay of political, military and economic crises. This era saw the culmination of a longstanding conflict between the Ottoman administration and local Zaidi forces,[51] exacerbated by widespread famine. The Ottomans had controlled central Yemen since their conquest in 1872, but their rule was consistently challenged by the local Zaidi Shi'a population.[52] This resistance intensified significantly in the early twentieth century.

The rebellion gained momentum in 1904 when the Zaidi Imām al-Mutawakkil ʿalā Allāh Yaḥyā Ḥamīd ad-Dīn (1869–1948) was elected and declared open revolt against the Ottomans.[53] His military campaign coincided with a severe famine from 1903 to 1905, during which the price of grain soared, and many urban craftsmen lost their livelihoods due to imports.[54] These social and economic hardships fuelled popular discontent, strengthening the Imam's cause.

[51]On Zaydī doctrine and political thought in Yemen, see Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[52]For further discussion of Ottoman governance in Yemen, see Caesar E. Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen: 19th-Century Challenges to Ottoman Rule* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); and Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen, 1849–1919* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011). For the lives of the Jews under Ottoman rule in Yemen, see Yosef Tobi, "The Yemeni Jewish Community Under Turkish Rule (1872–1918)", in *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in Their History and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 85–106.

[53]See, for example, Robert Bertram Serjeant, "Post-Medieval and Modern History", in *Ṣanʿāʾ: An Arabian Islamic City*, ed. Robert Bertram Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983), pp. 92–5.

[54]ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ ibn Yaḥyā al-Wāsiʿī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman: al-musammá Furjat al-humūm wa-l-ḥuzn fī ḥawādith wa-Tārīkh al-Yaman History of Yemen: Entitled Relief from Worries and Sorrows in the Events and History of Yemen]* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Salafīyah wa-Maktabatuhā, 1346/1927–1928), pp. 197–200 (in Arabic).

By late 1904, the Imām's forces laid siege to Ṣanʿāʾ in an event famously known as *Ḥawzat al-Nafar*. The name itself, which translates as "the siege of the handful", aptly describes the severity of the blockade: it became impossible to bring grain into the city, even in the smallest amount. This siege effectively cut off the city's food supply, leading to mass hunger and forcing many of its residents, both Muslims and Jews, to flee in search of refuge. Those who remained endured severe starvation. Facing overwhelming pressure and a lack of reinforcements, the Ottoman garrison was forced to surrender, and in March 1905, the Imām's forces entered the city.[55] Following the end of the siege, many of the refugees, including a significant number of Jews, returned to their homes. However, the Imām's victory was short-lived. After intense fighting and heavy casualties, the Ottomans successfully recaptured Ṣanʿāʾ by August 1905.

As noted, the period around 1905 was marked by extreme hardship in Ṣanʿāʾ, leading many residents to seek livelihoods elsewhere. The life of Ibrāhīm Kssār, Yisrael Kassar's brother, serves as a poignant case study of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by those in clandestine trades. As documented by Yosef Hubārah, Ibrāhīm "used to produce arrack" for sale to Ottoman soldiers. This enterprise was inherently dangerous due to local laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to Muslims. Although Ottoman officials occasionally relaxed this prohibition in exchange for discretion, Ibrāhīm's bold and trusting nature ultimately proved to be his undoing. As Hubārah attests, "He was a sturdy and strong man, and he trusted that he would be able to defend himself, and therefore he was not as careful as he should have been, until it cost him his life".[56]

This forms the contextual backdrop to the account presented at the beginning of Yisrael Kssār's letter. The dire circumstances in Ṣanʿāʾ during the war prompted many residents either to leave the city or to seek alternative sources of income elsewhere. The port city of al-Ḥodaydah, under Ottoman control and integrated into international trade networks, offered a viable economic refuge. Against this background, Hārun Bawsī turned to Ibrāhīm Kssār – renowned for his commercial activity along the trade routes beyond Ṣanʿāʾ and for his strong business ties with the Ottoman authorities – and entrusted him with capital intended for trade in al-Ḥodaydah.

However, the journey proved treacherous. Ibrāhīm, who was travelling with a merchant caravan, was forced to halt in the city of Manākhah. Situated at the summit of Jabal Ḥarāz, Manākhah was naturally fortified and additionally protected by an Ottoman garrison, sparing it from the violence and instability affecting the surrounding areas. Eliyah Ghiath, a Jewish resident of Manākhah, recalled in an interview that the city was famously never besieged, and not without reason.[57] As a result, many merchants, including the prominent Ḥibshūsh family, sought refuge there during the siege.[58]

[55]On Imām Yaḥyā's entry into Ṣanʿāʾ and the letter of protection he issued to the Jewish community, see Kerstin Hünefeld, "Niẓām al-Yahūd ('The Statute of the Jews'): Imām Yaḥyā's Writing to the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ from 1323/1905", *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 16 (2013): 1–30, https://journals.openedition.org/cmy/2013 (accessed 10 September 2025).

[56]See Yosef Ḥubarah, *Be-Telaʾot Teman ve-Yerushalayim* [*In the Sufferings of Yemen and Jerusalem*], ed. Shimʿon Greydi (Jerusalem: privately published, 1970), p. 325 (in Hebrew). My translation from Hebrew.

[57]See Yosef Tobi, ed., *Moreshet Yehudei Teiman* (Heritage of Yemenite Jewry) (Jerusalem: Boi Teiman Press, 1977), p. 71 (in Hebrew). On the Jewish community of Manākhah see Menashe Anzi, "Manākhah Jews: Economy, Trade and Donations", *Tema* 11 (2010): 123–55 (in Hebrew).

[58]See Yeḥiel Ḥibshūsh, *Mishpaḥat Ḥibshūsh* (The Ḥibshūsh Family), vol. 1 (n.p., 1985), 170–3 (in Hebrew).

It is therefore unsurprising that the caravan from Ṣanʿāʾ remained in Manākhah on the inland trade route. The merchants rented a house from a local trader, who later proposed that once the unrest subsided, he himself would travel to al-Ḥodaydah, or he would send the caravan and sell the goods on their behalf.

Yisrael's remark that he does not recall the merchant's name serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it underscores his commitment to precise and honest reporting; on the other, it functions as a rhetorical strategy aimed at persuading his son of the authenticity and reliability of his account.

But the sale in Ḥodaydah was unsuccessful and Hārun Bawsī did not receive his money. The reason for this was that the merchant in Manākhah was heavily indebted to a merchant in Ḥodaydah, once again as a result of the difficult conditions prevailing in Yemen at that time. Consequently, the goods that had arrived from that merchant to Ḥodaydah were seized by the Ḥodaydah merchant. Subsequently, Bawsī turned to Ibrāhīm, but Ibrāhīm refused to pay the debt himself, apparently claiming that the debtor was the same merchant in Manākhah. Therefore, Bawsī turned to Yisrael himself with a demand that he travel to Manākhah and demand the money from that local merchant.

The imposition of Ibrāhīm's debt on his brother Yisrael is not entirely clear, and Yisrael's silence on the matter in his letter appears deliberate. Was this merely an act of goodwill on his part? A sense of obligation as his brother's heir? Or does this silence conceal something more? As Gerber has noted, "imposing problems also emerge from what one does not find in letters. Gaps, breaks, and absences pose difficulties for researchers everywhere".[59]

It may have been related to the tragic death of his brother Ibrāhīm shortly after the events. The bulk of Ibrāhīm's trade took place outside the city, as he transported his goods to Ottoman military outposts. On one such journey in 1906, as Joseph Hubarah described it, Ibrāhīm was accosted by two Arabs who demanded a bribe to keep silent about his illicit cargo. After initially agreeing, Ibrāhīm reached the safety of a "Turkish camp" and refused to pay, going so far as to threaten to report the blackmailers. While he escaped their first attempt, his luck ran out. The two men later ambushed and killed him, abandoning his body in a remote place, where it was never buried. This tragedy left his wife in a state of complete destitution.[60] It is therefore possible that Ibrāhīm's debts were transferred to his brother, Yisrael, and to his remaining kin. Given that the rest of the immediate family consisted of sisters, it is likely that Yisrael inherited both his brother's obligations and his rights.

In any case, the responsibility for the debt ultimately fell upon Yisrael Kssār. The original plan had been for Yisrael to travel to Manākhah, sell the house belonging to the local merchant, and deliver the proceeds to Hārun Bawsī. However, in the meantime, Yisrael himself became entangled in a separate financial obligation.

Some time earlier, the affluent merchant Yaḥyā Pinḥas had approached Yisrael Kssār with a request to arrange the transportation of merchandise, probably to Ṣanʿāʾ. For this purpose, Pinḥas provided him with a substantial sum of money, which Kssār then paid to a group of camel drivers. Among them was a Muslim named Muḥammad Ayyāsh and another man identified only as "the Indian". However, due to the intensification of the siege and the war, the caravan was unable to complete the journey. Many of the camel

[59]Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives,* p. 7.
[60]See Ḥubahrah, *Be-Telaʾot Teman ve-Yerushalayim,* pp. 324–5.

drivers perished, and the merchandise was lost or severely delayed. As a result, Yisrael Kssār now found himself indebted to Yaḥyā Pinḥas for the full amount.

It is plausible that Pinḥas, known for his financial strength and assertiveness in such matters, demanded repayment with considerable urgency, as he had in other cases.[61] In response, Yisrael sold the house in Manākhah – originally entrusted to him by the local merchant (the owner of the house) – to Yaḥyā Pinḥas, probably at a reduced price, in order to settle the outstanding debt. The proceeds from the sale were subsequently transferred to Bawsī.[62] Nevertheless, part of the payment for the sale was never completed, as it was intended to serve as compensation for a debt owed by Yisrael Kssār to Yaḥyā Pinḥas. It is likely that Bawsī waived the remaining balance of the debt and settled for the money he had received from the sale, even issuing a receipt to Kssār confirming that the payment had been made. Nevertheless, rumours regarding the debt continued to circulate and spread. Although the debt to Bawsī had been fully settled from a legal standpoint, Yisrael nevertheless felt a moral and communal obligation to repay the entire amount to Bawsī's heirs. Thus, in his letter, Yisrael acknowledged his obligation to repay the debt and appealed to his son, Ḥayyim, for assistance in doing so.

As noted, the letter indicates that the economic deterioration in the overall situation of Yisrael Kssār occurred in the aftermath of the 1905 events and the debts incurred by his brother Ibrāhīm. Evidence of this decline is clearly documented in the purchase and sale deeds preserved in the family archive. This context may explain his decision, in the years that followed, to liquidate his real estate holdings, including the sale of his house in Ṣanʿāʾ to his sister and her children, members of the ʿAmr family, in 1913, and the sale of his agricultural lands outside Ṣanʿāʾ to his uncle, Yaḥyā ʿAmr, in 1908. These sources also indicate that the relevant purchase deeds were presented to the court, demonstrating that Yisrael Kssār had acquired the lands from Muslim sellers between 1902 and 1904. In fact, the documents show that prior to the period of the Hawzat al-Nafar (that is, until 1904), his property holdings were expanding, and he continued purchasing land in the Ṣanʿāʾ region.

As I propose, he found himself so entangled in financial difficulties that he was forced to leave Yemen altogether. Despite his efforts to liquidate his assets and repay his obligations, it is evident that Kssār was ultimately unsuccessful. Overwhelmed by debt, he was compelled to flee Ṣanʿāʾ, leaving behind significant financial liabilities.

The detailed account in the first part of the letter offers valuable insight into the daily lives of individuals during the turbulent period marked by the struggle between Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn and the Ottoman Empire. It illustrates how ordinary merchants managed their affairs amid the instability of early twentieth-century Yemen.[63] Similar depictions appear in other letters written by Yisrael, which likewise reflect not only personal and commercial matters but also broader political and public developments unfolding in Yemen, India and Palestine.[64]

[61] Archival documentation confirms a legal claim made by Yaḥyā Pinḥas regarding a separate sum loaned to Sleimān (Salamun) Kssār during this same period.

[62] The exact financial calculations concerning the debt and the sale are, regrettably, not entirely clear.

[63] As David Gerber wrote: "Immigrant letters are probably the largest single body of the writings of ordinary people to which historians have access". See Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives,* 5.

[64] On this issue, please see my forthcoming article, "Letters and the Jewish Yemenite Diaspora".

Part II – Yisrael in Bombay: From History to Intimacy

Following the account of the events of 1905 and the unfolding of the debt's circumstances, Yisrael goes on to address his son Ḥayyim directly, appealing for his assistance in repaying the debt. The transition from the first to the second part of the letter is marked by the Arabic term *ʾal-ʾān* (אלאן), meaning "now", which signals a move from a discussion of past events to a focus on the present situation.[65] This more personal section of the letter marks a shift from the historical narrative rooted in the early twentieth century to the present concerns of the letter writer in 1930, and accordingly, the tone becomes more intimate and emotionally charged. The repeated use of the Arabic expressions *qalbī*, meaning "my heart", and *tāj rāsī*, meaning "crown of my head", in the second part of the letter underscores the transition from historical narration to personal reflection and emotional engagement.

Narratives of familial separation and migration are common in the complex history of twentieth-century Jewish global dispersal. While my previous research has contributed to this body of work by demonstrating that the Yemenite Jewish community was far more mobile and dynamic than earlier scholars suggested, this letter adds a new dimension.[66] It reveals the emotional and physical challenges of transnational family life during the interwar period, offering a unique window into the human cost of these large-scale movements.

Yisrael wrote to his family in Ṣanʿāʾ during a period when correspondence was the primary means of communication. Consequently, these letters reflect not only a unique historical reality but also the cultural norms and accepted epistolary conventions of the time,[67] which frequently included a degree of emotional pathos. Therefore, some of Yisrael's emotionally charged expressions may represent stylistic conventions rather than a direct reflection of his personal state. Nevertheless, as this research argues, a closer examination of these letters reveals experiences and emotions that transcend literary conventions. Through vivid descriptions of his isolation and medical struggles, Yisrael crafts a deeply personal narrative that resonates with the reader almost a century later. The raw honesty with which he reveals his feelings and difficulties is remarkable. His frank descriptions of inner emotions and complex family dynamics offer a level of intimacy that allows for a profound, and at times uncomfortable, glimpse into his private world.[68]

As noted at the outset of this article, Yisrael's letters frequently disclose his inner emotional world, offering valuable insight into his worldview and beliefs across a range of subjects. Yet even in these deeply personal reflections, his perspective remains grounded in the collective sensibilities of the Yemenite Jewish community at large, and more specifically, those of the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ.

As demonstrated in my previous research, the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ developed a highly cohesive communal structure, characterised by clear and well-defined social norms to which members were expected to adhere. This *Ṣanʿāʾnī habitus* was reinforced through various frameworks, including educational institutions, public assemblies and communal spaces. In addition to formal mechanisms of enforcement, such as imprisonment and social

[65]In Judaeo-Arabic Geniza letters, "Now" serves a similar function, often marking a transition to a request.
[66]See my forthcoming article, "Letters and the Jewish Yemenite Diaspora".
[67]See Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*.
[68]I will elaborate on this issue elsewhere.

boycott, internalised values such as personal honour and fear of shame functioned as powerful tools in regulating behaviour and ensuring conformity.[69]

The letter written by Kssār appears to reflect this deeply rooted commitment to communal values and illustrates his strong adherence to the social codes of Ṣanʿāʾ. His language and tone convey not only personal responsibility but also an acute awareness of the expectations and moral framework upheld by his community.

As emerges from the letters and the testimonies of his family members, Yisrael left Yemen penniless and burdened by debt. Upon arriving in India, he hoped to find a livelihood that would meet his basic needs and perhaps enable him to repay what he owed. However, life abroad proved challenging, and opportunities for sustenance were limited. As he wrote to his son in one of his letters, likely referring to his own experience: "One should not say, 'I will go to the East, I will go to India [to make a living]'".

Despite the geographical distance, Yisrael remained tied to the social and moral expectations of the community he had left behind. Encounters with friends and acquaintances from Yemen who were passing through or living in India frequently served as reminders of his obligations. Accordingly, Yisrael expresses concern in his letter over the negative reputation attributed to him by the daughters of Bawsī, and firmly requests that the slander against him be brought to an end.

A powerful example of communal obligation and the fear of losing one's good name appears in a letter dated 15 February 1924. Yisrael informed Ḥayim that on that very day, Ṭobi son of Ṭobi had departed from Bombay – not before accusing Yisrael of failing to meet his financial obligations. Such an accusation, within the tight-knit Ṣanʿānī diaspora community, carried significant social consequences.[70]

According to the letter, Ṭobi even confronted Yisrael with a biting remark. In Yisrael's own words, he was accused of being "אנא גזלן מבהדל, אנא גזלת אהל צנעא והרבת בומביי" (Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic), meaning "I am a despicable thief; I stole from the people of Ṣanʿāʾ and fled to Bombay". Although phrased as a form of self-directed sarcasm or irony, the statement was clearly intended to shame Yisrael and to highlight the communal view of his unresolved debt. At the same time, it also reveals the depth of shame Yisrael himself felt in light of the unpaid obligation.[71]

As noted, the renewed demand that Yisrael Kssār settle his debt reached him in India via the Qoraḥ family. It should be emphasised that Sālim Qoraḥ was not merely an acquaintance but a close friend of Yisrael Kssār. Within the small Yemenite community in Bombay, particularly among immigrants from Ṣanʿāʾ, the two maintained strong and enduring ties.[72] In his letters from the 1920s, Yisrael repeatedly refers to his friend Sālim

[69]See Menashe Anzi, *Ha-Ṣanʿāʾnim: Yehudim be-Teman ha-Muslemit, 1872–1950* (The Ṣanʿāʾnis: Jews in Muslim Yemen, 1872–1950) (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2021) (in Hebrew).

[70]As scholars have noted, gossip functions as a central social instrument for enforcing norms, shaping reputations and regulating group behaviour. See, for example, Sally Farley, "On the Nature of Gossip, Reputation, and Power Inequality", in *The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation*, ed. Francesca Giardini and Rafael Wittek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 23–45.

[71]A letter from Yisrael to his son, preserved in the Kessar Collection, dated 10 Adar I, 5684, corresponding to 15 February 1924.

[72]Like Yisrael Kssār, Sālim Qoraḥ came from a well-known and distinguished family in Ṣanʿāʾ. Sālim's grandfather was Rabbi Ḥayyim Qoraḥ, one of the prominent rabbis of Ṣanʿāʾ in the late nineteenth century, and among his descendants were numerous rabbis of the city and its émigrés in Israel. For more on the family, see the work edited by Pinḥas Qoraḥ, *ʿAnaf ʿEṣ Avot* (*A Branch of the Tree of the Fathers*) (Bnei Brak, n.d.) (in Hebrew), as well as Yosef Qoraḥ's book, *Ḥayye Shalom: Pirke zikhronot mi-ḥayye ha-Rav Shalom Qoraḥ u-tekufato* (The Life of Shalom: Chapters of Memoirs from the Life of Rabbi Shalom Qoraḥ and His Era), ed. Adam Bin-Nun (Netanya: Teima – Association for the Promotion of Society

Qoraḥ; in one letter, he even suggests that his wife, Naʿmah, travel from Aden to India in Qoraḥ's company.[73] This indicates the degree of trust Yisrael placed in him, entrusting Qoraḥ with the responsibility of accompanying his wife on such a significant journey. Later, when Sālim Qoraḥ's children were born in India, it was Yisrael Kssār who performed their circumcisions, as members of the Qoraḥ family recalled years later.

I suppose that in his public interactions with the Qoraḥ family, whether on the street or at the synagogue in Bombay, Yisrael maintained a composed and measured demeanour, carefully negotiating to resolve the conflict diplomatically. However, in the privacy of his letters to his son, his true emotional state emerges unfiltered: raw feelings of shame and an urgent desperation to settle the financial matter quickly become palpable.

It was within this broader framework of diaspora life that the matter of the debt to the Bawsī family resurfaced. Members of the Yemenite diaspora who visited Yisrael in Bombay effectively "brought" the Ṣanʿāʾni community with them – its expectations, relationships and unresolved financial matters – thereby maintaining the continuity of communal accountability even across great distances.

Yet Yisrael's sentiments, as expressed in his letters, reflect not only a strong sense of obligation to repay his debts or a commitment to the Ṣanʿānī communal network that shaped his identity, but also a deep reservoir of religious and spiritual faith. The letters reveal a profound spiritual worldview where economic struggle and personal aspirations are ultimately subordinated to divine providence. In a letter to his eldest son Ḥayyim, who was contemplating emigration from Ṣanʿāʾ due to economic hardships, Yisrael offers more than practical advice; he provides a theological perspective on survival. He urges Ḥayyim to trust in God's plan, suggesting that despite the apparent impossibility of making a living, faith itself is the ultimate guidance. According to Yisrael, the reason is because "Everything is in God's hand, he is merciful and gentle; he oversees all his servants". The father's advice was: "Take a book of Psalms and go to the Torah Ark door and pray before God".[74]

This worldview, expressed in Yisrael's letter, reveals a deeply traditional religious outlook: he believed that his punishment would be carried out by angels and that he was obliged to seek forgiveness at Hārun Bawsī's grave. Such notions reflect a theology rooted in mystical and pietistic conceptions of divine justice and intercession.

Rabbi Yisrael's choice to engage with the doctrine of reincarnation (*gilgul*), meaning the transmigration of the soul into a new body, is particularly noteworthy. According to Kssār's own words, one of his concerns regarding failure to repay a debt was the possibility that, as a punishment, he would undergo reincarnation.[75] As is well known, the doctrine of transmigration entered Judaism primarily through early Spanish Kabbalah and gained prominence with the teachings of Safed Kabalists.[76] Kabbalah spread

and Culture, Documentation and Research, 2023) (in Hebrew). Bin-Nun also mentions Sālim and Ḥabībah Qoraḥ (ibid., 45, n. 37), although the information provided there is very limited.

[73]A letter from Yisrael to his son, preserved in the Kessar Collection, dated 22 Adar I, 5687, corresponding to 24 February 1927.

[74]A letter from Yisrael to his son, preserved in the Kessar Collection, dated 24 Sivan, 5690, corresponding to 20 June, 1930.

[75]In rabbinic tradition, particular emphasis is placed on the punishment of *gilgul* in relation to the sin of theft. I am grateful to Itiel Anzi for this observation.

[76]See Andrea Gondos and Leore Sachs-Shmueli, eds, *The Life of the Soul: Jewish Perspectives on Reincarnation from the Middle Ages to the Modern Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2024).

widely in Yemen and became a significant component of its religious culture,[77] and it seems that the concept of *gilgul* was a central theme among Yemenite sages, such as Sefer Segulot and Sefer Leḥem Shelomo.[78] Another source of influence on Rabbi Yisrael in this regard was the circle of Baghdadi rabbis whose teachings he encountered in Bombay. Among Baghdadi Jewry, the study of reincarnation was highly developed, particularly in the writings of Rabbi Yosef Ḥayyim, Rabbi Shimʿon Agassi and Rabbi Yehuda Fetaya.[79] The influence of Baghdadi rabbis on Rabbi Yisrael is evident in other areas as well – for example, in his request that his son light a candle in the synagogue in Ṣanʿāʾ for the elevation of Rabbi Yosef Ḥayyim's soul. And thus wrote Yisrael: ואריד מן פצ'לך תשתרי רטל ונץ שמע וסוויהן מן רבע רטל כל וחדה … ותדליקו אותם פי כניסתנא אנת ואכ'וותך ואומך וחדה לעלוי נשמת רמב"ה ז"ל ת'נייא לעלוי נשמת ח"ר יוסף חיים". And the translation: "And I would like you, please, to buy a raṭl and a half (approximately 700 grams) of wax candles, and make them into pieces, each weighing a quarter raṭl … and light them in our synagogue – you, your brothers, and your mother – one for the elevation of the soul of Rabbi Meʾir Baʿal Ha-Nes may his memory be blessed, and the second for the elevation of the soul of the esteemed sage Rabbi Yosef Ḥayyim".[80]

Kssār's perspective stood in sharp contrast to the rationalist and reformist ideology of the Dor Deʿah movement, a spiritual and intellectual current led by Rabbi Yaḥyā Qāfiḥ, which was gaining influence in Ṣanʿāʾ at the time. Dor Deʿah – literally "Generation of Knowledge" – sought to eliminate what it considered superstitious practices and to promote a Maimonidean rationalism that emphasised reason and philosophical clarity over esoterical traditions.[81]

It is no wonder that as a result of his worldview, Yisrael once asked his son to distribute the remaining money he had sent from India to Torah scholars for Rosh Hashanah, but not to the adherents of the Dor Deʿah movement [in the original: *Le-baʿale torah min*

[77]See Moshe Hallamish, *Le-Toldot ha-Kabbalah bi-Reshit ha-meʾah ha-shevah-ʿesreh* (The Kabbalah in Yemen at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1984) (in Hebrew), Aharon Gaimani, *Temurot be-Moreshet Yahdut Teman* (Changes in the Heritage of Yemenite Jewry) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2005), pp. 83–101; Ephraim Yaʾakov, *Eloah Mi-Teman Yavo: Peraqim be-Toldot ha-Qabbalah be-Teman* (God Came from Yemen: Chapters in the History of the Kabbalah in Yemen) (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2016) (in Hebrew), and Eliezer Baumgarten, "The Globalization of Early Modern Kabbalah: Internal Traditions and External Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Yemen", *AJS Review: The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies* 48 (2024): 261–77.

[78]Hallamish, *Le-Toldot ha-Kabbalah*.

[79]See Shimʿon Agassi, *Sefer Benei Aharon* (The Book of the Sons of Aaron) (Baghdad, 1908) (in Hebrew) – a commentary on Shaʿar ha-Gilgulim by Ḥayyim Vital [It is possible that Yisrael Kssār had already seen the book while still in Yemen, as it had been sent to the sages of Yemen. See Moshe S. Shabbat, *Yeshivot Baghdad*, vol. III, (Jerusalem, 2019), pp. 236–7. The original letters sent by Agassi to Yemen are preserved in the archives of the National Library. See ARC. 4* 2179/107, 108, Rabbi Shimʿon Agassi Archive, The National Library of Israel]; Yehuda Fetaya, *Minḥat Yehuda* (The Offering of Judah) (Baghdad, 1933) (in Hebrew), and Gondos's analysis: Gondos, Andrea, "The Dead Who Yearn to Die: Spirit-Possession and Soul-Healing in the Accounts of Hillel Baʿal Shem of Eastern Europe and R. Yehuda Fetaya of Baghdad", in *The Life of the Soul*, ed. Gondos and Sachs-Shmueli (2024), pp. 273–99.

[80]The letter is preserved in the Kessar Collection. It bears no date, but based on its content and handwriting style, it is from the early 1930s. It is worth noting that at that time, Yisrael suffered from severe eye problems and was unable to write or read, as he describes in his letters. Therefore, it is clear that this letter was written on his behalf by one of his acquaintances in the city, as indicated by the handwriting style.

[81]On the Dardeʿi movement see Mark Wagner, "Jewish Mysticism on Trial in a Muslim Court: A Fatwā on the Zohar—Yemen 1914", *Welt Des Islams* 47/2 (2007): 207–31; Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Enlightenment, Judaism, Islam and the Kabbala Dispute in Yemen: Social and Cultural Considerations", in *Radikalizm ve-Fanatiyyut Datit* (Radicalism and Religious Fanaticism), ed. Meir Litvak and Ora Limor (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2007), pp. 133–80, in Hebrew; and Menashe Anzi, "From Biblical Criticism to Criticism of the Kabbalah: Colonialism and Interreligious Interactions in the Indian Ocean and Yemen", *Journal of Levantine Studies* 10/1 (2020): 91–109.

dūn Darādaʿah].[82] Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that in another particularly revealing letter, Yisrael expressed astonishment upon discovering that his son Ḥayyim *hidardeʿa*, meaning he had joined the Dor Deʿah movement.[83] Rabbi Yisrael's pure and complete devotion to God, and his reliance on divine providence in matters of health, security and livelihood, stood in stark opposition to the Dor Deʿah worldview, which followed the rationalist path of Maimonides.

The letter presented in this article, which reveals Yisrael's strong desire to settle his debt to the Bawsī family, was not an isolated instance. In subsequent correspondence, Yisrael repeatedly returned to this matter, inquiring whether Ḥayyim had paid the remaining balance. He emphasised his determination to fulfil this obligation despite the considerable challenges he faced. For example, in a letter dated Friday, 21 Menaḥem [Av] (probably corresponding to 15 August 1930), he wrote to his son requesting to be kept informed about what he had written to him regarding the Bawsī daughters. Furthermore, he noted that Sālim Qoraḥ's wife, Ḥabibah Qoraḥ, had told him that the Bawsī daughters had sent him a letter through Ḥayyim Sharʿabi, but it had not yet arrived. Yisrael continued to raise this issue in subsequent letters, suggesting that the matter remained unresolved for some time, although it was probably settled later.

Conclusion

Yisrael Kssār's letters offer a rare and valuable perspective on the emotional and social dimensions of migration and displacement as articulated by a Yemeni Jewish scholar in the early twentieth century, revealing the uncertainties and hardships that shaped his experience of life in exile. His personal correspondence reflects not only individual struggles but also broader historical developments: the political upheavals in Yemen following the collapse of Ottoman rule and the consolidation of the Zaydī Imamate significantly undermined Kssār's social standing and destabilised his economic base. The compounded effects of war and drought during this period are clearly reflected in Kssār's accounts, which testify to widespread loss of wealth for many, and of life for many others. These years marked a moment of profound dislocation and structural transformation in central Yemen.

Within this context, the letter at the centre of this article also illuminates the moral economy of the Ṣanʿānī Jewish community, where personal reputation and social obligation were deeply intertwined. The emotional weight of rumours arriving from Yemen, and the sense of moral responsibility surrounding debts owed to the Bawsī family, point to a communal framework in which shame operated as a powerful normative force. The imperative to repay debts and preserve one's moral standing was not merely a matter of private conscience, but a fundamental social necessity, shaped by collective expectations and communal surveillance.

The spiritual dimension of Kssār's world also emerges from his writings. As a learned member of the Ṣanʿānī community, his worldview was profoundly shaped by the study of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* and other kabbalistic texts. He drew upon the Yemenite–Ṣanʿānī

[82]This directive appears in a letter preserved in the Kessar Collection. Letter from Yisrael to his son Ḥaim, dated Friday, 17 Menaḥem [Av], apparently corresponding to 7 August 1925.
[83]This conclusion emerges from several letters, and I will address this matter in greater detail elsewhere.

tradition, while also integrating teachings acquired in Bombay from members of the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora. This synthesis reflects the ongoing negotiation between inherited traditions and new diasporic encounters, characteristic of transregional Jewish intellectual life in the modern period.

While Ṣanʿānī culture is often characterised by emotional restraint and highly regulated modes of expression, Kssār's intimate letters reveal the powerful feelings that lay beneath this cultural surface. His correspondence articulates anxiety, shame, moral urgency and longing with striking intensity, offering a rare glimpse into a world that was usually kept private. These letters suggest that beneath the norms of composure and social discipline, deep affective currents shaped individual experience and self-perception. This hidden emotional dimension, which falls beyond the scope of the present discussion, will be addressed in greater depth in future work.

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